

SIN AND THE HUMAN CONDITION
-SLOTH-
EXODUS 4:10-20
EPHESIANS 4:25 - 5:2

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Poor Moses. I can empathize with him: things had been going rather well for a change. He had killed one of Pharaoh's men and barely escaped from Egypt with his life. But now he was quite content, living with his wife in Midian, tending the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law. But then he had that disturbing experience with a burning bush, and now God was ordering him to go back into Egypt - where he was wanted for murder - and there organize the people of Israel for an escape. Moses didn't want to be a revolutionary: he had had a taste of trouble and compared to that had now found the life of a sheep herder much more to his liking. He didn't want to be anything more than he was; and in the 4th chapter of Exodus we find him back-peddaling as fast as he could, trying desperately to squirm out from under the heavy weight of responsibility that was beckoning him, "Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person", he said: and the only help he got was Aaron, who would do the talking. Moses was pushed by God into becoming something more than he was - someone bigger than he ever thought he could be. Moses, the docile sheep herder, dragging his feet all the way, became Moses the liberator, the George Washington of Israel.

This is a sermon on sin - a different definition of sin. Moses - who was content with the status quo - is my first illustration. But before we proceed, allow me briefly to review the understandings of our topic which we established last week.

We established, first that sin is not a very popular pulpit topic for two reasons: one, experience has taught us that most pulpit attacks on sin are irrelevant; two, we don't like to be called sinners, and in fact, don't often feel like sinners.

We established, second, that evil is a reality in the world; that most of it derives from man's inability to live in brotherhood with his fellowman; and that it won't go away regardless of our attempts to look at the world through rose tinted spectacles.

We thought about sin in classical Biblical terms: i.e. the pride of Adam and Eve which motivated them to break the garden rules. We saw how pride motivates us to play the game of "Mine is better than yours" on the inter-personal level: and how it gets amplified into racism and militant nationalism on a corporate level.

Our sin, we concluded, is in wanting to be more than we were created to be; our craving for power; our incessant demand to be the center of our own little world. This morning I would like to suggest that the classical definition of sin as pride is just half the story; that there is another, and equally important way of understanding the fall of man and the human condition.

For Adam and Eve essentially soldout, abdicated from their responsibilities, reneged on their exalted position in the created order. God, in the Genesis story, had given them the world as an abundant paradise: he had given them dominion - power and authority over the rest of creation. And the first thing they did was allow a snake to tell them what to do. Given their dignity and personhood by God, they allowed a snake to determine who and what they would be. And so it's not just pride operating here: it's something else - moral laziness, refusal to be what they were created to be: the word for it is sloth. In the Biblical setting it continues to define man's predicament: men refuse to be fully men, right up to Moses who tried very hard to get out of being all of the man God wanted him to be.

The early theologians recognized that pride and sloth work in tandem to create man's predicament. Sloth was one of the seven deadly sins in the early Church's catalog. But then two things happened to Christianity which caused man's condition to be defined almost entirely in terms of pride. First, Christianity confronted Greek philosophy. Now, the Greeks were pretty certain that if there was anything wrong with man it was physical: that the natural impulses of the body were highly suspect: that the highest level of manhood was achieved by repressing physical needs and desires, and living in the realm of ideas. Under that kind of influence Christian thinkers began to see pride as man's only problem: pride motivated men to be gluttons, pride motivated men to satisfy their bodily needs, pride made men want sex, food, drink and good times. And Christianity turned a corner at that point that has been terribly difficult to un-turn. The Christian model became the monk - celibate, poor, hungry, pious: the Christian ideal became life-denying rather than life affirming. God had made a mistake in creating men as he had: the corrective was in doing everything possible to deny it all.

The second influence was political. The Roman Emperors, beginning with Constantine,

saw in Christianity a common cause that might be the cement to hold together their crumbling empire. Christian leaders appreciated the respite from persecution, the freedom to function openly and their new prestige. And so they cooperated by defining a good Christian as a good citizen. The model, in this context, became the compliant, loyal man who obeys all the rules: who is interested - not in accepting responsibility for the body politic, but is very content to leave the decisions and the responsibility to the rulers - who, it was believed, were ordained by God in the first place.

Those two factors - centuries old - combined to create a style and self understanding among Christians that still is belittling and denigrating to human dignity: together they implanted guilt in every human heart for simply feeling like a man, and encouraged - because of all this negative self-perception - the abdication of individual responsibility.

Fifteen hundred years later, this is where we still are. We still insist that you've got to feel bad about yourself before you can feel good. We still insist on clubbing people over the head with their total depravity, until all they can feel about themselves is guilty. We're still not sure that it's alright to have fun - to enjoy life: we are still unconvinced that God knew what he was doing when he made us sexual and gave us a healthy sense of lust and desire. There are no Protestant monasteries, of course, but the Christian model for an astounding number of people still seems to be the monk who spends his years escaping from his humanness. Politically, the Roman Empire is long gone, but the equation of the good Christian with the good citizen is still one of the most potent myths alive: under its guise we don't have to face the frightening moral questions posed by My Lai, or a General Lavelle, or the continuing bombing in S. E. Asia. Our role is simply to be loyal citizens.

Sin as sloth means being less than, not more than man. Harvey Cox puts it in these terms: "Sloth means the determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity." That was what happened in the Garden of Eden - the fall of man is not just the expression of primordial arrogance: it's also a moral cop-out, a refusal to be. And for my money, it is this understanding of the human condition that needs to be held up before us with relentless integrity. For I have come to believe that while pride and sloth may walk hand-in-hand in our lives, it is our refusal to be men - to become more

than we are - to bear responsibility for creation - that today endangers the very fabric of our civilization.

On a personal level, sloth is reflected in a general lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. In practical terms we have learned to have very little regard for our own abilities and our own worth. And we pass it on to our children. In the accepted jargon of the day, we teach our children that they are "not O K"; and that their young lives must become a contest to prove to us that they are "OK". On the level of interpersonal relations sloth is expressed in our willingness to allow others to determine who and what we shall be. When the anger of another man causes me to be angry, I have been less than my own man, I have given up my identity and allowed him to determine who I am. When I'm in a group and the conversation turns to something that I find offensive and wrong, and I compliantly smile, I have been less than a man.

Articulate Black militants have been trying to demonstrate how a whole race of people in our land has reneged by allowing white stereotypes to determine black identity. If you're nervous about Black power - Black identity - try to put it in the framework of a whole race of people discovering their God-given right to be themselves, and not what others want them to be.

The real problem with sloth, you see, - as it is with pride - is that on the corporate level it becomes deadly and destructive. Books written about Nazi Germany keep returning to the fact that it all became possible, not because all Germans in the 1930's were fascists:but because the vast majority of Germans simply refused to feel and to bear personal responsibility for what was going on in their very midst. One modern commentator took a long look at Adolph Eichmann and concluded that he was not the devil incarnate, but rather an overpoweringly ordinary man, and that most of us are capable of committing genocide just by getting to work on time and keeping our noses clean.

Now, whenever analogies are drawn with Nazi Germany, we bristle a bit, mostly - I think - with good cause. And yet, let me tell you about an experiment conducted at Yale University in 1967.

A cross section of more than 2,000 males from Bridgeport, Conn., participated. Divided into groups of learners and teachers, the learners were strapped into electric

chairs - the teachers seated at a table in the next room. Through an inter-com the teachers asked questions and were instructed to administer a shock by pushing a button for each wrong answer. There was no shock of course. But into the sound system was fed screams and cries of pain. The teachers were carefully told that the shocks would increase in velocity. The object was to discover at what point individuals would refuse to obey instructions in a rather authoritarian atmosphere because of conscience or compassion. The result - 62% went all the way - administering all the current they could. The researcher observed: "With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who in everyday life are responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority. The results are.... disturbing "(Harris "I'm OK - You're OK" P. 249-250).

In theological terms the 62% were involved in the sin of sloth: they allowed someone else - something else, in the case of symbols of authority and scientific neutrality; to determine who they would be.

Is it really so far from Eichmann to that? I don't think so. Harvey Cox has said that "sloth is the spiritual paraplegia of the modern metropolis. "That is to say, sloth - which, by the way, comes from the Greek "not caring" - allows us to refuse to be responsible politically, to remain uninvolved, to stay at home on election day and let the other guy do the deciding. Sloth allows us to look at a slum and feel nothing, to walk by someone in trouble and do nothing, to watch public officials spend money and feel absolutely no responsibility for the policies on the basis of while the money is spent.

Sloth is dangerous because it is essentially a despising of one's self - and the next logical step is a despising of everyone else.

In Jesus Christ, however, we believe we have seen man as God created him to be. His sinlessness is in his refusal to be motivated either by pride or slothfulness. He was fully a man. The first Adam sold out: but in Jesus Christ a new possibility was introduced to humanity: full and free and total manhood. That man taught that people are valuable: that human beings are creatures of great worth because of their creator, and that every man is called to realize the full extent of his manhood.

That man - Jesus Christ - taught that it's great to be me: that I have worth - not

on the basis of my accomplishments, but because God made me: that I am given - by God - responsibility for my own life, and a measure of responsibility for the life of the whole world. Someone has said that "to be a Christian is to decide to be fully a man" as God intended.

The antidote to sin as sloth, then, is not guilt and guilt and more guilt. Rather it is to acknowledge our individual worth: to celebrate who we are: to affirm our faith and trust in God simply by becoming everything we are able to be.

All of that has been summarized by Dick Williams in his book "God Talk", under the title "What made that, made me". I'd like to share a part of it with you in conclusion:

"I am proud of my creator, because He has created so much.

And because of that I have a sense of my own value and dignity as a human being.

Save me from being big-headed, Lord.

Save me, too, from losing this sense of my fundamental value.

Because if you made me, I'm valuable.

Like a little pencil sketch by an old master, nothing in comparison with his great masterpieces.

But precious to the one who knows, and understands.

I am just a fragment of God's creation - but valuable because of my creator. AMEN

Father, the status quo is comfortable, and it's not easy to become more than we are. Give us a new sense of our worth. And help us to see that because we matter - all men matter. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN